

**Seton Hall Commencement Address**

**“You are More Important than You Know”**

**Mary Eberstadt**

**May 19, 2014**

Good morning, and thank you for that welcome.

You have to admit, it's a challenging spring to be a Commencement Speaker. Some campuses seem to want to tar and feather their invited guests. Meanwhile, pundits keep saying that no one ever remembers Commencement speeches anyway. So speakers these days are getting two messages. "We don't like what you say – *and*, we're not listening to you anyway."

But that's a caricature. I know that you *are* listening, and I want very much to honor your attentiveness and your achievement today by leaving you with some thoughts to remember.

To all of you parents: I can only say as only a mother of another new college graduate can say that your happiness and pride today are palpable, wonderful to see, and richly deserved. To all of you students – fellow graduates of the class of 2014: I say Bravo! Brava! Bravi! Like many of you, I'm a family-first-er. The degree conferred on me today is the first on any side of a large, blended, extended and itinerantly immigrant family. It's an honor many generations in the making, just like your degrees, and like yours it's shared among people past, present and to come.

To Archbishop John J. Myers, Chair of the Board of Trustees and President of the Board of Regents; to Mr. Patrick Murray, Chair of the Board of

Regents; to Dr. Gabriel Esteban, President of the University; and to Dr. Larry Robinson, University Provost and Executive Vice President:

Thank you all for inviting me to Seton Hall University.

It's especially humbling to share the company up here of Cardinal Dziwisz. During the last years of the Cold War, right before most of you students were born, I was privileged to serve as a speechwriter to various leaders in the United States government. As those of you who've studied history will know, the people of Poland and the Polish Catholic Church were courage personified during those years. They embodied the principle that truth is always truth no matter who says otherwise, and that lies are always lies no matter how often they are repeated.

Poland's valiant example taught me, and teaches all of us, something enduring. Protest just for the sake of protest is like taking a selfie: it's here today, forgotten tomorrow. But protest for the sake of Truth with a capital T is something else – it's a moral act that if repeated becomes a historical legacy lasting for centuries, like the Twentieth Century defeat of communism. And it's that way of bearing witness that I'm here to talk to you about today.

Pope Francis has been repeating something over and over in recent speeches that goes straight to the heart of what I want to share with you. He says that our moral business as human beings is to see all people,

everywhere and at all times, as our brothers and sisters -- to see in every individual the face of Jesus Christ or God, as he keeps putting it.

Of course not everyone believes in God, although at a Catholic university it's probably safe to assume he has at least some people in His corner here. But everybody, religious or otherwise, can understand that Pope Francis is getting at something profound with this image of his.

Let's start by noting what he doesn't say. He doesn't say that everyone wears the face of God "except for whoever un-friended you yesterday." He doesn't say everyone wears the face of God "except for the people you disagree with, or think you ought to disagree with, or you have been told you ought to disagree with." He doesn't say everybody "except for your student loan officer." No. He says that *every human being* wears the face of God -- no asterisks or footnotes attached.

It's no coincidence that the Pope keeps repeating this message at this moment in time, this moment when you, the class of 2014, are moving out and up into a society badly in need of leaders with backbone. My purpose here today is to connect those two things, the meaning of Pope Francis's insistence on this point, and the meaning of what we might call your own moral footprint in the world. My message amounts to seven simple words: *You are more important than you know.*

You are more important than you know, first, as members of the families that have lovingly brought you to this place pulsing with happiness. These include your parents, grandparents or great-grandparents who may have immigrated to America. They include all the hands that rocked your cradles and washed your gym clothes, all the mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers and others who've lifted you literally and figuratively, from your very first car-seat to the seat you occupy here today.

Just as looking, really looking, at the Cardinal here as an individual human being situated in history revealed the invisible souls connected to his presence here today, so does looking out at all of you from this dais reveal the waves of human devotion that have brought you to this place. Behind each and every one of you stands an invisible posse stretching from the present moment way back through time. And just as invisible but still present are the other people waiting in the wings of your futures – the marriages you will make, the children you will be privileged to have, the others to whom you will act as mother and father, sister or brother, with or without ties of blood.

Every year, as those of you who have studied behavioral science know, we learn more and more about the miraculously social world of animals, especially mammals. Science shows that elephants and orcas and dolphins and others are exquisitely social creatures, more so than was ever understood before, whose well-being depends on their relatedness to others in their group. The same scientific uncovering is true of human

animals. Every year, sociology and psychology and anthropology yield up new evidence about the indispensability of your family to everything about you.

You students are more important than you know in another way -- as ambassadors of the Judeo-Christian tradition of service to others, no matter where you end up living and what else you end up doing. For this lesson, too, you can thank this great school of yours, again regardless of your own affiliation or beliefs. The Catholic Church, like the Judaism from which it drank, exhibited from its earliest moments a mindfulness toward the poor and worst-off that is without historical peer. Its hundreds of thousands of hospitals, soup kitchens, shelters, schools, hospices, and other homes for the castaways are monuments to a truth that's often ignored these days:

The Church is an immense force for good in the world.

You can be proud of that legacy shared by virtue of your time here – again, whether you are churchgoers yourselves or not. Every time you drop off groceries or calm a sick child, every time you give till it hurts and put your personal gifts at the service of that call to mercy, your worth to the people you help is more than you, or any of us, can possibly know. And specifically to the Catholics among you: be proud of all that, and don't ever wear a "Kick Me" sign for being Catholic.

You are all more important than you know to the communities that you now join on leaving Seton Hall University. Seeing the face of God in every human being isn't just about checking a box about "poor people in faraway lands." It's about thinking globally, and living locally. It's about knowing the names of the people who mow your lawns or clean your offices at night. It's about leaving tips and thank-you's in places like hotel rooms and restaurants and anywhere else for all the unseen hands that clean up after you. It's about understanding that charity isn't charity when you're using other people's money -- it's only charity if you're using your own. Seeing God in every face you meet also means watching our language more closely than many people do – for starters, never, ever using the word "illegal" as a noun to describe a human being.

You are more important than you know as citizens, residents, and friends of the United States of America – right now this minute, and especially this minute. An insidious new intolerance now snakes its way into classrooms, boardrooms, newsrooms, and other places vital to the exercise of free speech. This new intolerance says we must have diversity in all things – except ideas. It says we must all march in ideological lockstep – or feel the snake bite, and be taken by ambulance from the public square. 36 years ago, the towering Russian intellectual Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered a Commencement address someplace north of here, and among the things he said was this. "A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today." 36 years later,

watching the silencings and self-silencings in public life around you, do you think his words sound overly dramatic – or chillingly prophetic?

The new intolerance insinuates that people who put their faith in a Deity are on the wrong side of history. It's up to you, every one of you, to bear witness to this contrary principle: there is no wrong side of history. There is only the wrong side of truth.

You are more important than you know, finally, because of this happy fact: the most underestimated force on the planet may be the power of example, including your example.

Ten years from now, people who are children today will be looking up to you for mentorship. Thirty years from now, some of you will be attending a Commencement ceremony just like this one, and may be even in this very place, sitting where your own families sit now and thinking about the parties right around the corner. A hundred years from now, people who don't exist yet will be remembering you fondly as a coach, a teacher, a neighbor, a friend, a grandfather or grandmother, and much more.

The ripples of human action fan out too broadly and in too many directions for our limited mortal eyes to track or map. A priest I know in Maryland once prayed on his knees in snow outside an abortion clinic —unbeknownst to him at the time, a woman who was looking out the window she cancelled her appointment that day, and went on to have a baby some months later. All because she saw this stranger praying in the snow. That



priest mattered more than he knew.

You can be proud all your lives of the great, ethical truths that you have been taught in this great Catholic university. They aren't arbitrary theological edicts, but universal truths with a claim to every heart and mind. It's good, not bad, to defend the defenseless – the destitute, the castaways, the throwaways -- against the powerful and predatory. It is true, and not something to be mumbled with apology, to say that human beings have human dignity and yes, human dignity means that some things are beneath human beings. If we didn't believe that, we'd have no argument against slavery. And it's positive, not negative, to look backward in time to the Roman Empire, say, and to see that the Church started a moral revolution by saying *no* to female infanticide and *yes* to the idea that men and women have equal moral worth.

That last point is especially pressing to be mindful of in a world bent on Roman infanticide 2.0. As of the past couple of decades, millions and millions of baby girls are missing from the face of the earth – because they were disposed of, once a sonogram showed them to be girls, not boys. All those disappeared girls – those victims of what some have dubbed “gender-cide” -- have faces too. This very month, the world waits anxiously for news about the teenaged schoolgirls of Nigeria, kidnapped from their very dormitories by brute force and held captive in defiance of every legal and moral norm. Everyone here stands with them, and everyone here can connect the moral dots between those twin transgressions: If it's wrong to

*kidnap* girls because they are girls, it is wrong to *abort* girls because they are girls, too.

In standing up for truths like these, in protesting politely but forcefully on the side of truth like the brave people of the Cold War and many other heroes past and present, yours are absolutely vital voices in the years ahead. You are all, if you want it, part of the new moral movement that Pope Francis seems to be calling for between the lines of his speeches. It's a movement of empathy for everybody, in an age where empathy was never needed more. It's a movement that sees human faces for what they are -- not only where they're obvious, but also where they aren't. As graduates of a university that stands by all these things, as foot soldiers and officers in the making of this new moral movement now being born, you can be proud of your work on its behalf for all time to come -- just as your family and teachers and well-wishers everywhere, including this fellow graduate, will never forget how proud we all are of you today. Thank you.